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ABSTRACT

The New Center for Learning is an experimental program at East Texas State University which offers students an alternative, interdisciplinary general education curriculum which can improve student writing more than traditional programs do. Students in the program take 36 hours of courses throughout their college careers which are offered by a relatively small number of faculty who agree to emphasize and teach good writing throughout the curriculum. All courses in the curriculum were designed with five broad goals for every course to address: (1) self-awareness; (2) clarification and formation of personal values and awareness of cultural values; (3) effective communication; (4) manipulation of the environment; and (5) planning for the future. Students write weekly journals and more formal writing assignments in every class. Students are encouraged to include in their journals any matters that seem significant to them as learners. Students practice good writing under pressure of grades and time in their formal writing assignments. Students understand that the subject matter of the essays they write is the starting point for the course. All courses are team-taught and both teachers read and comment on student essays. The message that the curriculum sends is that student writing is important--it is worthy of the teachers' and the students' time. (RS)

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Teaching Writing in an Interdisciplinary Context: One Experiment

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Teaching Writing in an Interdisciplinary Context: One Experiment

The New Center for Learning is an experimental program at ETSU which offers students (among other things) an alternative, interdisciplinary general education curriculum. One of the hypotheses that we are testing is that because our program differs from traditional general education structures in several ways, we can improve student writing more than the traditional programs do.* Those differences relevant to this discussion are as follows:

(1) Whereas most traditional general education structures encourage students to regard general ed courses as hurdles which one should get over during the first two years, NCL students take one to three three-hour courses each semester, sometimes remaining in the program until graduation. Thus we have frequent contact with our students for several years.

(2) Because our core curriculum is tightly designed, we are able to emphasize and teach good writing in all thirty-six hours of the curriculum, rather than limit explicit attention to writing to a couple (if any) of required freshman comp courses. And because the program is relatively small--eight faculty on part-time appointments--we are able to take consistent advantage of this constant contact: we can agree on goals, philosophy, and practice.

(3) Unlike traditional distribution requirements intended to guarantee exposure to the basics of a variety of disciplines,

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*I am not deceived that somewhere exists the prototypical "traditional" program. Yet there is a difference, usually noticeable, between traditional and non-traditional programs.

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our entire core curriculum is designed as a coherent interdisciplinary whole with themes, issues, and questions which recur in different forms in each of the six courses. Thus students see the connections between courses and are less subject to the perception that "writing is what happens in English classes and it has little importance for psychology"...or for whatever.

(4) Perhaps more important, because they've all participated in planning the core curriculum, the faculty in the New Center are committed to teaching writing and are not given to the assumption that "writing is what students should learn in English classes and what I shouldn't have to fool with."

(5) NCL courses are team-taught, and all student writing submitted for a grade is double-graded by both members of a team. This process provides students with lots of commentary and provides faculty with confidence in the grades they assign and with a collegial check on the comments each makes. In other words, we have to discuss real assignments, real comments, and real grades with each other. This process rarely happens in traditional programs.

(6) Because the NCL faculty are from different disciplines, we have had to undergo a lot of training in teaching writing. As a part of designing a curriculum, we have had to articulate a philosophy of teaching writing, to agree on certain grading standards, to specify our teaching goals, and to practice <u>with each other</u> all of these activities. Very few faculty, even those in English departments, have devoted as much time to shared thinking through on a programmatic level the assumptions which underlie their treatment of writing in the classroom.

Since I've placed so much emphasis on the coherence of our core curriculum, I should now like to summarize that curriculum. In planning the curriculum, we devised five broad goals that we intend for every course to address: self-awareness, clarification and formation of personal values and awareness of cultural values, effective communication, manipulation of the environment, and planning for the future. Now we don't take these goals to be unique or even very remarkable. But we do believe that it is important--and relatively rare--for a general education program to adhere carefully to the goals it has set for itself. Only by keeping the overall goals in sight as we planned the separate courses have we been able to design a curriculum that has internal consistency, that adds up to whole greater than the sum of its parts.

In the fall and spring semesters of their freshman year, NCL students take Communication and Personal Inquiry, 1 and 2. Both courses attempt to get students to pay careful attention to who they are--their values, habits of thinking and feeling, and their strengths and weaknesses--within the broad intellectual tradition that has developed around this important issue. For instance, the freshman version begins with a viewing of Friedman's play "Steambath" which involves several characters, immediately after their deaths, re-examining their lives. We follow discussion of that play with a reading and discussions of Plato's "Apology." The point in these exercises is to give students a concrete perspective and respectable models for an examination of their own lives and consciousnesses. We continue this self-awareness theme by moving through sections on learning styles, on creativity and imagination, and on stereotyping and

social roles. In addressing these topics, we use materials as diverse as small group exercises from the Life/Career Development package, Bronowski's essay "The Reach of the Imagination," the film "Why Man Creates," and Joan Didion's "On Keeping a Notebook." At about the middle of the course, we shift the emphasis from intense self-examination to a consideration of several theories of human nature. Using Stevenson's Seven Theories of Human Nature, we study the concepts of man of Plato, Christianity, Freud, Sartre, Skinner, supplementing Stevenson's assessments with materials from the writings of these thinkers. Our intention is to help students see that the questions we raised in the first half of the course--who am I? Why am I like I am?--have firm roots in the intellectual tradition, and that a number of often contradictory theories have contributed to the ways that we understand ourselves and others.

In the second semester sequel to this course, we address the same questions, but the emphasis shifts a bit to a consideration of the relationships among people. Consequently, we rely slightly more on philosophy and belles lettres, but the variety is still there: Aristotle's Ethics, Rollo May, Tennessee Williams, T.S. Eliot, Plato again, Hemingway, and even Mel Brooks.

We use writing in these courses primarily in two ways: weekly journals, and more formal assigned essays and paragraphs. Neither of these uses is particularly unusual, but in neither case is writing itself the only goal.

We ask students to keep weekly journals, and for these two courses, we ask them simply to include in those journals any matters that seem significant to them as learners. We point out that personal

matters--that is, those not related to formal classroom activities--are fair game. We ask only that they try to think through any ideas that they present, and we stress that journals are a good place to explore ideas, to make mistakes, to take chances. While our bias is for students to be concerned with cognitive issues, we do not discourage, and sometimes we encourage, their using journals as a place to work through matters which are charged emotionally for them. As a result, we get as much attention to problems with parents as to Plato, to unrequited love as to learning styles. But we get little that is not important to the students who write it. And we are convinced that, at least for beginners, good writing can only be about subjects that are important to the writer.

We take the journals up once a week, respond to them, evaluate them, and return them to students. Our responses may be in any form: most often we address the content of the journals, asking questions to help a student dig deeper into an idea, pointing out options to a proposed course of action, or encouraging particularly sensitive or thoughtful entries. We do not hesitate to argue with a student in a journal or to offer suggestions about how to write more effectively, but we try always to make it clear that we are serious about journals being a good place to try out new ideas or to make mistakes. And because we use journals in every course in the New Center curriculum, we devote significant portions of the commentary to helping them learn how to use journals for learning--how to explore, how to take chances with ideas.

Typically, journals will account for 10% of the course grade, but our evaluation of individual entries is based on a good, indifferent,

or weak scale (smiles, yawns, frowns). We make those distinctions primarily on our assessment of how conscientious a student has been: students who turn in most of their journals and who have not been blatently lazy generally receive full credit. In most instances then, journal grades turn out to be a bonus for the student, a reward for reliability and diligence. And we have found that by rewarding the diligence, we encourage the thoughtfulness and the exploration and the risk-taking.

We are committed to requiring student journals for at least four reasons: (1) We find that we really can help students form the habit of trying out ideas without fear of being wrong--and of getting bad grades for being wrong. The emphasis on personal evaluation and exploration of ideas is hardly an innovation in using journals in the classroom, but we find that it is particularly effective for us given our interdisciplinary goals. The journals provide students fine opportunities to look for connections, to make syntheses between what we are studying and what they are living, between what they are feeling or worrying about or becoming interested in and the "official intellectual content" of the courses. And because the faculty reading and responding to these journals are from a variety of academic disciplines--right now we have people from English, history, chemistry, political science/philosophy, biology, math, computer science, and psychology--because students get responses at one time or another from this variety of faculty, they are further encouraged to make those connections.

(2) We like being able to have the short private dialogues in writing with our students. In some cases, notably the silent, shy

types, conversations in journals are the main medium of personal contact with the students.

(3) We are convinced that the more students write, the more likely they are to become better writers. Proponents of almost all theories of teaching writing--from the free-writers to the classical rhetoricians--seem to agree that more writing is better than less writing, although the agreements end at about that point. We find that simply spilling words on paper helps many students overcome their fears of having to write. But unlike the purest of free-writing advocates, we think that whatever words get spilled should have some significance for the writer and therefore for a teacher who is also a reader. (Which is to imply a value judgment: Anything a student writes for a teacher should have some kind of importance for the teacher.)

(4) Once we get students spilling words about matters of consequence to them, we find that they are fairly receptive to suggestions on how to spill words more effectively. In defiance of most journal-keeping theory, we are perfectly willing to mark mechanical errors or to make stylistic suggestions in student journals, but we are careful that students understand why we do this: they realize that much of good writing is habit, that bad grammar and infelicitous phrasing are bad habits, and that bad habits need constant attention. They also realize that in journals we will not "count off" for poor mechanics, but that neither will we ignore or condone them. If a student has a complicated idea he is trying to work out, we do not want him to avoid the idea because he can't get the sentence down correctly. But we do want him to realize that having worked out his idea, he can best communicate it if his writing is clear and correct.

While our journal assignments are relatively unstructured, our "formal" writing assignments are highly structured and designed to accomplish at least three goals:

First, and least, we prefer not to give tests in the traditional sense of testing. Because we argue that thinking and writing are time consuming processes, we don't believe that tests are a fair measure of, or a reasonable impetus to such thinking. Hence, we assign essays as a stimulus to and a measure of learning, and we are fully aware of how Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle applies to assignments that try to fulfill both of these roles.

Second, and more important, we try to assign topics that provide occasion for further learning. In an essay on leading dialogue classes, Peter Spader identifies three levels of questions that we can ask students: Information questions require direct recall; organization questions ask the student to organize the information he recalls; and application questions ask him to apply this organized information in some way.* We rarely assign information topics, occasionally assign organization topics, and most often make assignments that require application. In the students' cliche, we ask questions "that make you think." Now everyone is in favor of questions that make students think. What we try to do is ask them questions that make them think more about ideas they've already been thinking about. We try to give them assignments that follow directly from what's been happening in class: we want information correctly recalled and

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*"The Silent Ones: Inviting Students to Dialogue," New Directions in Teaching, 5 (Spring, 1977), 6-7.

sensibly organized, of course. But we also want them to understand the value--the application--of that information and organization. And we want to stress exploration and making connections.

Third, and most to the point of this essay, we assign formal paragraphs and essays because we want the students to practice good writing under pressure of grades and time. Whereas journals normally account for about 10% of the course grade, formal writing assignments are worth 50-60%.

Underlying all these goals is our belief that students will best learn to write by writing on matters that they know about, that they are interested in, and that they feel are important to them and to others. Or as one side of a current discussion argues, "You can't write writing."

What I've described so far about our formal writing assignments seems to differ little from the conventional freshman comp class which uses a reader as well as a rhetoric text. But there is a difference in emphasis. In a traditional comp class, students are aware that the goal of the class is to get them to write themes, and that the essays in the reader are either models for them to follow or ideas for them to respond to. In the New Center, students understand that the subject matter of the essays they write is the starting point for the course. They understand that thinking and writing about that content is a necessary, but only intermediate step between the initial confrontation with the subject matter and making it part of their lives. All of which is to say that New Center students generally find our assignments "relevant."

We try always to give the students some choice of topics. And we try to plan well enough so that we can give every essay assignment to students in writing. This practice obviates most "I didn't understand the assignment" complaints, but most importantly, it allows us to collaborate on the assignments to help be sure that such a complaint is not justified. We think that such collaboration is not only essential to the kind of assignments we want to make, but it is relatively rare: how often do freshman composition teachers design essay assignments as a group, much less history teachers or sociology teachers? Working together on essay topics forces us to be clearer in writing those topics, and it helps us understand the purposes of any given topic better--we have to mutually understand and agree on the course goals and the specific content before we can agree on the best topics.

For instance, about five weeks into the freshman course, we sometimes study a section about the roles we play and the roles we impose on ourselves and others, looking primarily at racial and sexual stereotypes. After playing the board game "Blacks and Whites" and reading Ellison's Prologue to Invisible Man and John Howard Griffin's Black Like Me, we gave this assignment:

> James Baldwin (noted Black novelist) has said that it is impossible to grow up in the United States without being racially prejudiced. And Larry King (a white Texas writer) in Confessions of a White Racist has written, "A year never goes by, indeed, in which I cannot look back and see in my conduct or concepts some vestiges of white racism...." What is truly amazing is how many white Americans continue to deny their (and the nation's) unseeing or uncaring attitudes. Using your own experiences as well as what you have learned by reading Griffin and Ellison, write a careful essay about your own racial attitudes and how they developed. Be as concrete as possible about both the readings and specific experiences and feelings you have had. (You might, as an extreme measure, examine your attitudes toward interracial dating and/or marriage.) If you would like to read an outstanding essay by a

northern Jew analyzing his own attitudes toward Blacks, check "My Negro Problem--and Ours" by Norman Podhoretz.

The two quotes in the topic were suggested to us by the director of freshman English, Dick Fulkerson, who helped us design the writing component of the entire course. But the topic itself was the result of group collaboration--we took Dick's original suggestion and adjusted it to fit what had actually happened in class. And the topic worked: not only were the students--at least those who gave it a decent try--able to design sensibly organized and respectably developed essays, but they had to learn something and articulate that learning in order to do it. The learning itself was about their own attitudes, but it was stimulated and shaped by the course content.

A bit later in the same course, after we had finished sections on the Platonic and the Christian theories of human nature, we gave this topic as one of their choices:

> Analyze thoroughly the relationship between Platonic periagoge and the experience of St. Paul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-22), and write a thesis statement. Then using the method of comparison and contrast, and concretizing completely, write an essay supporting your thesis.

(One word of explanation: "concretizing" is a term we picked up from Kytle's book. We are unanimous that it's a barbarous term, but the students latched onto it quickly, seemed to understand what it meant, and liked it, so we use it. And it works.) This topic is somewhat different from the first: it specifies a structure and a strategy but it deliberately omits any hint as to what their analysis might produce; the students had to produce these independently; they had to do their own discovering. While we had, of course, dealt with periagoge in discussing Plato (although we used the Greek term infrequently), we had

not studied the passage from Acts at all. The results were mixed, although most of the students who chose this topic hit easily on the similar realizations that occurred to St. Paul and to the prisoner in Plato's cave allegory. The best papers carefully examined the similarities and the differences, noting, for instance, that while Plato's prisoner was led through an experience symbolizing the development of his reason, Paul's experience was specifically a mystical revelation. And so on. In this topic, we did not ask for specific application to personal experiences, because we think that students should also be encouraged to consider ideas in "isolation," as it were. Relevance is not always immediate, nor is it necessarily personal.

Even in good traditional programs, students write for the purpose of writing in English or composition classes, and they write as a means to an end--tests, term papers--in other classes. But they get writing instruction only in the composition class, where writing is not a means to an end, and no writing instruction, and probably little useful feedback on writing in those classes where writing "matters," where communicating substantial content is the purpose. In the New Center, we are able to integrate writing instruction into content courses taught by content specialists who value, emphasize, and teach writing. By now, I think my thesis about motivating students to learn to write better should be clear: writing should be integral in the curriculum, not a separate component of it. And, of course, that curriculum should be a coherent whole, the first piece fitting into the second so that there is continuity and consistency. Although the ostensible subject matter of our fall and spring courses are different, the kinds of

thinking, the value judgments, the necessity for clarifying one's own position before making decisions are constant in all courses.

The "teaching methods" we use to instruct students in writing are not significantly different from those used in various English classrooms, although we use a fairly wide variety of them. We use Ray Kytle's Clear Thinking for Composition, a pre-writing text that is especially valuable in the context of the kind of courses I've described. We use a traditional rhetoric text, McCrimmon's Writing with a Purpose, but it is an important text, not just in a couple of comp courses, but in an entire 36 semester hour general education block. McCrimmon and Kytle have a philosophy, one often considered old-fashioned these days, which simply says that one should think before writing, that one should have a reason for writing, and that one should be aware of one's audience when writing.

We give students essay assignments well before the due date, and we set an intermediate date when we will work in class on rough drafts. Further, we offer specific rewards for those who bring their rough drafts to that intermediate class period: usually we offer them an unconditional 1/3 of a letter grade (an additional + or -) on the final essay grade. It's not so much the amount of the reward that counts, though it should be noticeable, as it is the message it implies: we back up what we preach--prethinking and rough drafts are important stages in the composition process. The students get this message quickly, and they learn that it is right. We also allow rewrites for an improved grade in certain instances, but only in certain instances. When we are persuaded that the student made a respectable effort on the first version of an essay, and when it seems likely that he will learn

from another rewrite, we offer him the chance. But we do not have time for a blanket rewrite policy, especially since such a policy might encourage students to give less than their best on the first effort. In a given set of 25 papers, we might offer rewrite privileges to three to six students.

We also devote time--not enough in my estimation--to letting the students work together in small groups planning papers or revising rough drafts. This gimmick works best, we think, when we are able to give the small groups specific instructions about what their task as a group is. Students (like real people) prefer chit-chat to work when they get into groups. But if we tell them to identify the topic sentences in each others' papers, to check for sufficient detail to support each topic sentence, and to help each other identify mechanical errors, they will do it. They can and do help each other, especially if the faculty roam the room, providing more expert help when it is needed.* And in helping their classmates, they learn about their own writing.

The most important teaching trick we use, however, is also the most common. We work very hard to give students helpful, understandable, and encouraging comments on the papers we read. Double grading each paper makes this process more effective and more reliable.

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*For those who are hung up on the student's doing his own work, I might point out that at this reading, eight of my friends and colleagues have read and criticized drafts of this paper. I imagine most professional writers have editors.

We think it is worth the unusual costs in time that it takes, at least partly because the faculty have varying amounts of experience in grading writing. We have an unwritten policy that obligates any pair of graders to get together when their grades differ by more than one letter, not to average the two grades, but to re-grade the paper until they agree on the proper evaluation. This habit works, and we teach each other a lot.

And we spend as much time as possible in individual conferences with the students who are having writing trouble. Fortunately, our University is blessed with a very good tutorial lab, and we can delegate some individual work there. But we make sure the students realize that while the lab is a valuable resource, we consider it our primary responsibility to see that the student gets the help he needs. In the last analysis, there is no substitute for individual attention to specific writing problems, whether that attention comes in the margin, in the writing lab, or in personal conferences.

Even if they did no other good--and they do considerable other good--individual conferences would be desirable because the very medium has a message: student writing is important, it is worthy of a teacher's time and it is worthy of a student's effort. This is not a message students hear easily, but it is probably the most important one they should hear about writing. And it is one of two messages that I want to stress. The other is that neither students nor teachers will ever consider students' writing important until that writing is about matters of importance to both of them.

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